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ABSTRACT

A composition course for preservice teachers that emphasized writing as a means of inquiry elicited mixed results on student evaluations. The reading and writing assignments were designed to foster what the instructor calls "arguing to inquire." The purpose of this kind of writing is not to take a position and convince others of its rightness but to explore a range of positions to learn what is at stake in adopting any of them. Thus the emphasis is less on learning argument as a universal form or method or as an epideictic form (where argumentative conventions are deployed as if performing a ritual for an audience of one, as taught in most composition textbooks) but as a means of exploring content. Intellectual content is best represented not as a static, impregnable monolith, but as a contested territory. When there are open questions and multiple positions, there is always more to learn. Arguing to convince assumes that questions are settled. The mixed responses on student evaluations might be attributed to the course content--which examined Robert Bellah's "Habits of the Heart" and other readings responding to it--but it may also be attributed to the writing approaches employed, which were not as pat or neat as students are accustomed to. Writing instructors and writing students stand to gain much through an open acknowledgement of theoretical differences about teaching writing. Indeed, instructors should put these differences to use. (TB)

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RESISTING *HABITS*: PROSPECTIVE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS MEET THEORY IN PRACTICE

I take it for granted that composition theory is properly a subject for any advanced writing course, and for any student in the course, education major or not. The issue for me is how theory might best be integrated into a course whose focus is on writing, not theory *per se*. I have come to the conclusion that composition theory belongs to a writing program as a whole, not to individual courses. Students can, and do, "learn" theories of writing as they write for specific contexts. But I think they can best become aware and make use of these theories not simply by taking a theory survey course or by taking a variety of different theoretically-oriented writing courses but by doing both *within the context of a writing program committed to dramatizing and making pedagogical use of theoretical differences throughout its course offerings.*

Over the last 14 years, I have occupied both poles of the certification-seeking student/college professor relationship. In the early 1980s I completed a secondary certification program, did a full year of student teaching, then taught high school for three years. Now I teach in a university program where a good number of English majors are themselves seeking teaching credentials. As a certification student, I valued theories because they helped me see my assumptions as part of some larger structure and gave me a way of comparing different structures of assumptions and practices. As a teacher, I try to help students make use of theories and to value them because they are useful.

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In the fall of 1992 I taught an advanced writing course to a group made up predominately of juniors and seniors seeking secondary teaching certification. Some were English Education majors, some were English majors with an education minor. A few were "plain" English majors or majors from other fields. The course is open to anyone interested in an upper division expository writing course, though in recent years it has mostly served secondary certification candidates because it is required by the College of Education for its program.

Being brand new to both the university and the course, I had little sense, beyond what I could glean from faculty whose students had taken the course or who had taught it themselves, of what its place in our curriculum was or what kinds of expectations students brought with them. So I went ahead and designed a course in the Bartholomae/Petrosky tradition, using readings on a common topic and writing assignments organized in a cumulative sequence. The principal writing issue posed throughout was how "newcomers" might contribute to an ongoing public conversation on a complex topic where opinions are often deeply-felt and hotly debated. Our starting point was Bellah, et al.'s ***Habits of the Heart***, a 1985 look at the condition of community in America. The first assignment asked students to summarize the overall argument of ***Habits*** in order to establish a context for subsequent conversations. In the next section, we read some reviews of ***Habits*** as well as essays from a collection, ***Community in America***, written specifically in response to ***Habits***. The major assignment here asked students to take an issue raised in one of the essays and talk about how it extended or complicated the discussion of that issue in ***Habits***. We next read ***The Good Society***, Bellah, et al.'s 1992 follow-up to ***Habits***. I asked students to write about how the book responded to one of the earlier critiques. For the final project, I asked students to make their own contribution by "extending the conversation." They could do this by following-up an existing argument through further research and argument or they could do it by addressing Bellah, et al.'s arguments to a new audience. Some of the final projects were spectacular: a poetry anthology on the theme of community, a Sesame Street script, an historical explora-

tion of John Winthrop's vision of community (he's one of the representative cases in ***Habits'*** narrative).

Despite my pleasure at the depth and intellectual risk-taking represented in these and other projects, what I remember most about the semester are the conflicts students and I had. A fair number of students just plain didn't like ***Habits of the Heart*** itself, partly because of the ideas (for instance, its claims about "destructive individualism"), partly because of the tone (which some took to be condescending), and partly because of the way ***Habits*** erects sweeping generalizations upon a fairly narrow range of evidence. Since I had taught a version of this syllabus at another university and encountered similar responses, I feel safe in assuming that they were not unique to these students.

Other comments had more to with the apparatus of the writing course and thus suggest some assumptions students were making about writing and writing courses. The comments included:

* the readings were not good models of writing
* there was not enough choice in the readings
* there wasn't sufficient variety in the kinds of writing I asked for
* the writing assignments were too open-ended
* neither the course materials--reading and writing assignments--nor the course design (sequenced reading and writing on a focused topic) were relevant to a secondary school setting

Consider these statements in light of the assumptions I used in designing the course. The reading and writing assignments were designed to foster what I call arguing to inquire. The purpose of this kind of writing is not to take a position so one can persuade or convince others of its rightness but to explore a range of positions in order learn what's at stake in

adopting any one of them. Thus the emphasis is less on learning argument as a universal form or method (as logic teaches) or as an epideictic form (where one deploys argumentative conventions as if one were performing a ritual for an audience of one, as most composition textbooks teach) but as a means of exploring content. I assume that intellectual content is best represented not as a static, impregnable monolith, but as a contested territory whose boundaries are continually shifting and whose occupants have varying stakes in determining what positions are constructed and valued. Think here how most textbooks represent a field's content versus how most journals represent it. Because I believe any interesting content ***is*** contested territory, I believe that argumentation in the Toulmin and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca tradition offers the kinds of analytical tools necessary for dealing with open questions, multiple positions, and intellectual conflict. When there are open questions and multiple positions, there is always more to learn. Arguing to convince assumes that questions are settled; arguing to inquire assumes that there is always more to learn, that, in fact, one's own questions, one's own position might even change.

I'm not going to claim that the ***Habits*** syllabus represents the best way to learn this kind of writing or the best implementation of my theoretical assumptions. Even if one agrees that arguing to inquire is a legitimate form of writing and worth learning, one can ask, as the student comments implicitly do, whether "Community in America" was the best issue (intellectual territory) to explore, whether ***Habits*** and its companion volumes were materials best suited to exploring this territory, whether the assignments were the best means for practicing inquiry and argument, even whether my explanations of the course and of its materials and assignments were effective. In hindsight, I would answer these questions differently now than I did going into the course. But I think the student comments were questioning more than the pedagogical apparatus of the course; I think they were also questioning the kind of writing I was asking them to learn and practice. In particular, the comments suggest to me that they disputed the value of collectively posing questions about content in a writing class; after all, content belongs to disciplines and is not the province of a skills class. Dissonance is

exacerbated when writing is focused on argument; in a writing class, content is supposed to be a matter of individual choice because "everyone is entitled to her own opinion." Form, on the other hand, is a fit matter for collective instruction because forms are objective, neutral, perhaps even universal. Models of form, varieties of form, assignments which lay out the form: these are the proper subject of writing instruction, especially when individual choice about content seems to be taken away.

Questions of implementation aside, and I'd like to emphasize again that there are significant ones in this case, I think students would have been less initially resistant had they not come to the course believing that their views of writing were the only ones or that, while there might be other views of writing around, there was no longer any reason to take them seriously. We should be so lucky to live in a world where all questions of writing theory, pedagogy, and practice were settled. However, the answer to this situation is not to require students to take a theory course or to require teachers to talk explicitly about theory in their existing courses. Rather, I believe we should design writing programs in which theoretical differences among teachers and courses are asked to serve pedagogical ends. We should do more than acknowledge that theoretical differences exist; we should put them to use. This way, the responsibility for posing questions about writing theories, pedagogies, and practices falls not to individual teachers, students, or courses, but to the program as a whole. When responsibility for posing questions is shared, students and teachers have a chance to work out of old habits and actually put theories into practice.

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